

'I'm Happy I Can Be a Member Now'

A change in VFW Auxiliary bylaws opens the door for more spouses worldwide to join the nearly 500,000 members working on behalf of veterans and their families

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For the first time in her 15-year marriage, Hyun-Ju Garduno is now a VFW Auxiliary member, thanks to a change in the organization's bylaws. A vote by Auxiliary members at the national convention in Kansas City, Missouri, last July paved the way for Garduno to join.

In Section 101 of the VFW Auxiliary National Bylaws, the words "member of the United States" were removed with regard to membership eligibility.

In other words, a person is not required to be a U.S. citizen in order to join the Auxiliary.

For Garduno and others like her, this measure ensures spouses with citizenship outside the U.S. are recognized for the volunteer work they perform for veterans by officially welcoming them into the Auxiliary.

In Delaware, Garduno, who is a citizen of South Korea, has volunteered with VFW for Buddy Poppy distribution events and cooking for various Post fundraisers. Garduno, wife of VFW Quartermaster General Marc Garduno, also decorated veterans' graves on Memorial Day.

She has attended Department of Delaware conventions and VFW national conventions and visited the VFW National Home for Children in Eaton Rapids, Michigan. Garduno even served as a leader for her husband's Post Venturing Crew.

In essence, she was playing the role of an Auxiliary member without being given due recognition. Garduno said she's happy to now be a member of an organization she has long supported.

"I believe the Auxiliary is there to help veterans and the VFW, so I could not understand

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why only a U.S. citizen can do this,” said Garduno, who now belongs to Post 6483 Auxiliary in Milford, Delaware. “I’m happy I can be a member now and not just a visitor at the conventions.”

According to Auxiliary National Secretary-Treasurer Ann Panteleakos, this change is long overdue and has been a priority for many years.

“This move has a great impact on Posts overseas especially,” Panteleakos said. “In locations such as the Philippines, South Korea, Australia and Europe, people are excited about this.”

As with most changes, there was some resistance on the convention floor, Panteleakos said. Compelling statements by members such as Department of New Mexico Auxiliary President Betty Decker swayed the vote.

“There should be no reason why eligible family members cannot be members based on their citizenship,” Decker said. “These veterans have fought for us. So why should it matter that they may not be citizens or that they married someone who isn’t a citizen? We live in a global world. If you have the ability to help my veteran or any veteran, then you should.”

Panteleakos said while increasing membership is always vital, it’s not the reason for the eligibility change.

“We did not make this change to grow membership,” she said. “This was done to pay respect for the many spouses who have long worked on behalf of veterans but were not allowed to call themselves Auxiliary members.”

Garduno encourages anyone who once could not join the Auxiliary to do so as soon as possible. “We were always there to support our husbands and veterans’ families,” she said. “Now we can be there and be members, too.”

AUXILIARY GROWTH IS ‘A WIN FOR EVERYONE’

While this step was not about membership, Panteleakos said there are other ways to grow membership. She encourages Posts and Auxiliaries to work closely. When a Post gets a new member, it’s helpful for the Auxiliary to know so a representative can reach out regarding family members.

“We need to remember that Auxiliary eligibility is quite expansive,” Panteleakos said. “Typically, a VFW member has several family members eligible for Auxiliary membership.”

Step- and adopted parents, children, siblings, half-siblings, grandparents and grandchildren are considered the same regardless of whether they are biologically related, Panteleakos added.

The Auxiliary has two awards in place to recognize VFW members who recruit Auxiliary members:

- The Cardinal Puzzle Pin and Citation is awarded to each VFW (and Auxiliary) member who recruits five new and/or reinstated members through May 31.
- The National Membership Achievement Award will be presented to each VFW (and Auxiliary) member who recruits 20 new and/or reinstated members through May 31.

The official form is required for submission and is found at vfwauxiliary.org/resources. The form is due to Auxiliary National Headquarters by June 10. Recipients of the pin will receive their awards through the mail, while those earning the National Membership Achievement honors will be recognized in Kansas City in July at the national convention.

“Growing the Auxiliary membership is a win for everyone,” Panteleakos said. “When VFW testifies on Capitol Hill, the Auxiliary membership number is counted in with the VFW. The greater the number, the louder the voice.”

This article is featured in the 2022 March [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.